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Beware Utopian Traps

Contribution to GTI Forum [Solidarity with Animals](#)

Richard Falk

As I reflected on Eileen Crist's brilliant [essay](#), I was struck by my own failures to live up to its ethical underpinnings. On two occasions, out of love and respect for animals, as well as the well-documented hazard of exerting pressure on ecological limits, I tried to give up meat-eating and limit my consumptive habits to plant-based food. Both experiments of living more in accord with my ethical and ecological beliefs exposed the tensions associated with finding a path between living together with others in extant modern societies and walking on paths more in accord with my values and hopes for the future.

I returned to meat-eating the first time after forgetting to inform dinner hosts about my vegetarian turn. When I arrived at their home, I realized that, at the very least I would be spoiling their dinner plans by forgoing what was being served, possibly even tarnishing our friendship. With this single slip, I lost the will to give up meat and fish, which I had throughout my life consumed without guilt, with pleasure. The pleasure of this mainstream diet returned, but now tinged with guilt—"after such knowledge there is no forgiveness." I soothed these feelings with the superficial consoling thought that I was not meant to take on every ecological and ethical challenge, and would lose focus on what I could best do if I spread my transformist zeal too broadly.

My second fall from grace was more dramatic. I was very proud that I had once more become a vegetarian, and kept the discipline for a year or so, only to discover that my all-too-human temperament succumbed to social pressure. I was in Jordan leading a UN mission. A Palestinian family living in Amman invited me for a meal. When I entered their home, I realized that they had prepared a feast in my honor, apparently in gratitude for this UN initiative to learn the grievances of the large Palestinian refugee communities living in Jordan. As guests gathered

to sit on the floor in a circle surrounding a large pot of roasted goose, an utmost expression of traditional hospitality, I lacked the will and composure to stick by my dietary commitment. And like a recovering alcoholic who dares to take a social drink, I lost confidence in living my way in a social milieu that was overwhelmingly at ease with eating habits that were inevitably abusive in their treatment of animals raised as food in the modern way. Even if this goose was less cruelly treated while alive, it was not the case with livestock in general, including poultry. As an ardent believer in GTI, was I also bound as an individual to make essential futuristic lifestyle changes now? Surely, I was free to make some changes, but was I bound to this, or suffer the indignity of being a hypocrite?

I give this weight to my personal experience because I think it touches upon widespread dilemmas of effectively engaging the GTI in a variety of existential circumstances. I often asked myself if this deference to societal tradition indicated weakness of will or a reluctance to challenge social convention for fear of rejection. I acknowledge a degree of culpability. At the same time, some necessary transformative initiatives at the level of individual behavior pose difficult choices. Giving up smoking or heavy drinking is situated in a socially acceptable comfort zone, while being a guest of those who have worked hard to produce a satisfying social occasion, whether with friends or strangers, poses a dilemma. Perhaps the dilemma will be overcome, or at least mitigated, by inter-generational shifts in values, habits, concerns. Those coming of age in the future will be increasingly faced with the dire consequences of the unmet challenges of modernity, and their adoption of new priorities will alter notions of hospitality, friendship, and right-living. What now seems a matter of choice and commitment at the margins of social life becomes closer to being an obligation of the entire community.

I think of Greta Thunberg, who as a teenager displayed greater wisdom and a clearer voice about living in harmony with nature than the elites currently running the world. With the candor of innocence, she told a gathering of UN diplomats that they would die of old age while she would die from climate change. Her words prefigured an ethical and transformational imperative. Yet her dramatized concerns were pragmatic as well as a matter of intergenerational grievance. The ecological foundation of what made Thunberg such an extraordinary prodigy among activists reflected growing apprehensions about the failures of government and the UN to address

adequately threats posed by climate change. The official rhetoric stressing the urgency of response did not generate the will to act effectively through the commitment of resources and collective initiatives of sufficient magnitude.

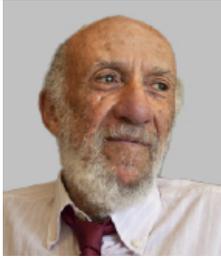
Putting my view of relations with animals in the present historical context, I favor what would seem a controversial position in the GTI community: a modest approach that defers the fundamental challenges set forth in the intellectually challenging, yet politically regressive Crist assessments. I believe it is politically regressive because it distracts attention from severe systemic biodiversity and global warming threats that will foreclose both human and animal futures if not addressed in the immediate future with requisite attention, which includes resources, equitable distribution of adjustment burdens, obligatory regulatory standards that are implemented. In effect, for individuals to take on the exploitative hierarchy between humans and animals at this time is dangerously diversionary for those who are dedicated to safeguarding the ecological prospects of most species, including the human. Although there are variations depending on context, I would make the same argument for those proposing the abolition of war, rather than limiting themselves to the abolition of nuclear weapons and killer drones, or for those insisting on equality in relation to wealth within and between states, rather than the insistence on equity.

In other words, in my view the GTI framework must endeavor to combine pragmatism with its future imaginary, or it will fall into the typical utopian trap of projecting a desired future without worrying too much about getting there, what some skeptics have called “the transition problem.” Returning to the theme of relations to animals we can and should address the cruelty presently embedded in our agro-industrial practices, not only to protect animals, but to ensure that the most vulnerable and marginalized humans are not victimized in the course of trying to improve the material conditions of the rich and powerful. We need to remember, as Stuart Rees reminds us in his pathbreaking book *Cruelty or Humanity* (2020), that cruelty underpins current political, economic, social, and cultural structures and is an embedded side-effect of standard capitalist operations not only in relation to food, but for all basic dimensions of modernity, including energy, militarized security, consumerism, and social protection. In this sense, educational reform giving positive emphasis to pre-modern and native peoples relations with animals and worldview would bring into the world new generations of more eco-sensitive youth, finally overcoming the techno-scientific

hubris of claiming progress, while being blinded to cumulative regressive features of human hierarchy, hegemony, geopolitics, exploitation, and limitless growth.

Matters of diet and individual lifestyle should be left to personal choice, eco-sensitive education, and circumstances, and not posited as mandatory norms during the transition process. In effect, priorities need to be established at all levels of social interaction, but especially within state-centric frameworks. If we try to do too much, we will tragically end BY doing too little!

About the Author



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